

The Open Mind

J. Robert Oppenheimer

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THE OPEN MIND

J. Robert Oppenheimer

Dr. Oppenheimer, Director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, was wartime director of the Los Alamos Laboratory and has been a leader in the American effort to organize international control of atomic energy. His faith in the possibility of agreement has not been shaken by the current failure of negotiations. In the following speech, given to the Rochester Institute for International Affairs, he discusses the spirit which should guide American conduct in the present impasse.

A few weeks ago the president of a college in the prairie states came to see me. Clearly, when he tried to look into the future, he did not like what he saw: the grim prospects for the maintenance of peace, for the preservation of freedom, for the flourishing and growth of the humane values of our civilization. He seemed to have in mind that it might be well for people, even in his small college, to try to take some part in turning these prospects to a happier end; but what he said came as rather a shock. He said, "I wonder if you can help me. I have a very peculiar problem. You see, out there, most of the students, and the teachers too, come from the farm. They are used to planting seed, and then waiting for it to grow, and then harvesting it. They believe in time and in nature. It is rather hard to get them to take things into their own hands." Perhaps, as much as anything, my theme tonight will have to do with enlisting time and nature in the conduct of our international affairs: in the quest for peace and a freer world. This is not meant mystically, for the nature which we must enlist is that of man; and if there is hope in it, that lies not least in man's reason. What elements are there in the conduct of foreign affairs which may be conducive to the exercise of that reason, which may provide a climate for the growth of new experience, new insight, and new understanding? How can we recognize such growth, and be sensitive to its hopeful meaning, while there is yet time, through action based on understanding, to direct the outcome?

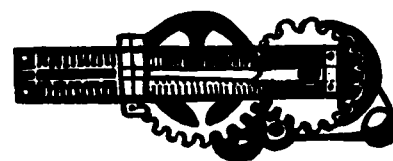
To such difficult questions one speaks not at all, or very modestly and incompletely. If there are indeed answers to be found, they will be found through many diverse avenues of approach—in the European Recovery

Program, in our direct relations with the Soviet states, in the very mechanisms by which our policies are developed and determined. Yet you will not find it inappropriate that we fix attention on one relatively isolated, yet not atypical, area of foreign affairs—on atomic energy. It is an area in which the primary intent of our policy has been totally frustrated. It is an area in which it is commonly recognized that the prospects for success with regard to this primary intent are both dim and remote. It is an area in which it is equally recognized that this failure will force upon us a course of action in some important respects inconsistent with our original purposes. It is an area in which the excellence of our proposals, and a record in which we may and do take pride, have, nevertheless, not managed quite to quiet the uneasy conscience, nor to close the mind to further trouble.

Our Efforts for International Control

The history of our policy and our efforts toward international atomic control is public; far more important, it has from the first aroused widespread interest, criticism, and understanding, and has been the subject of debates in the Congress and the press and among our people. There may even be some notion of how, if we had the last years to live over again, we might alter our course in the light

¹ The essential elements of these proposals were: (1) the internationalization of the key activities in the field of atomic energy; (2) the complete abolition of secrecy; (3) the prohibition of national or private activities in fields menacing to the common security; (4) the intensification of cooperation between nations in research, development, and exploitation; and (5) the abrogation of the right of veto, both in the management of the affairs of the international development authority and in the determination of transgression against the covenant.



of what we have learned, and some rough agreement as to the limits within which alternative courses of action, if adopted at a time when they were still open to us, could have altered the outcome. The past is in one respect a misleading guide to the future: it is far less perplexing.

Certainly there was little to inspire, and nothing to justify, a troubled conscience in the proposals that our government made to the United Nations as to the form which the international control of atomic energy should take.¹ These proposals, and some detailed means for implementing them, were explored and criticized, elaborated, and recommended for adoption by fifteen of the eighteen member-nations who served on the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission. They were rejected as wholly unacceptable, even as a basis for further discussion, by the three Soviet states, whose contributions to policy and to debate have throughout constituted for us a debasingly low standard of comparison.

This September the Commission made its third, and what it thought was its final, report to the General Assembly, meeting in Paris. It recommended to the Assembly that the general outlines of the proposed form of international control be endorsed, that the inadequacy of the Soviet counter-proposals be noted, and that the Commission itself be permitted to discontinue its work pending either a satisfactory prior negotiation between the permanent members of the Security Council and Canada, or the finding by the General Assembly that the general political conditions which had in the past obstructed progress had been so far altered that agreement now appeared possible. The Assembly did, in fact, accept all the recommendations but one. It asked the Commission to continue meeting. In its instructions to the Commission, however, the Assembly failed to provide affirmative indications of what the Commission was to do, or to express any confidence in the success of its further efforts; in fact, one might dismiss this action as no more than an indication of unwillingness on the part of the Assembly to accept as permanent the obvious past failures of the Commission to fulfil its mandate.

Yet we may recognize that more is involved in this action, that we will come to understand in the measure in which the nature and purposes of our own preoccupation with the problem become clearer. In part, at least, the Assembly asked that this problem of the atom not be let lapse because it touches in a most intimate, if sometimes symbolic, way the profoundest questions of international affairs; because the Assembly wished to reaffirm that these problems could not be dismissed, that these issues could not be lost, whatever the immediate frustrations and however obscure the prospects. The Assembly was, in fact, asking that we let time and nature, and human reason and good example as a part of that nature, play some part in fulfilling the age-old aspirations of man for preserving the peace.

Our Political Traditions of Persuasion and Free Discussion

In any political action, and surely in one as complex and delicate as the international act and commitment made by the United States with regard to atomic energy, far more is always involved than can or should be isolated in a brief analysis. Despite all hysteria, there is some truth to the view that the steps which we took with regard to atomic energy could be understood in terms of the terror of atomic warfare. We have sought to avert this; we have further sought to avert the probable adverse consequences of atomic armament for our own institutions and our freedom. Yet more basic and more general issues are involved, which, though symbolized and rendered critical by the development of atomic energy, are in their nature not confined to it; they pervade almost all the key problems of foreign policy. If we are to seek a clue to the troubled conscience with which we tend to look at ourselves, we may, I think, find it just in the manner in which we have dealt, in their wider contexts, with these basic themes.

The first has to do with the role of coercion in human affairs; the second, with the role of openness. The atomic bomb, born of a way of life, fostered throughout the centuries, in which the role of coercion was perhaps reduced more completely than in any other human activity, and which owed its whole success and its very existence to the possibility of open discussion and free inquiry, appeared in a

strange paradox, at once a secret, and an unparalleled instrument of coercion.

These two mutually interdependent ideals, the minimization of coercion and the minimization of secrecy, are, of course, in the nature of things, not absolute; any attempt to erect them as absolute will induce in us that vertigo which warns us that we are near the limits of intelligible definition. But they are very deep in our ethical as well as in our political traditions, and are recorded in earnest, eloquent simplicity in the words of those who founded this nation. They are, in fact, inseparable from the idea of the dignity of man to which our country, in its beginnings, was dedicated, and which has proved the monitor of our vigor and of our health. These two ideals are closely related, the one pointing toward persuasion as the key to political action, the other to free discussion and knowledge as the essential instrument of persuasion. They are so deep within us that we seldom find it necessary, and perhaps seldom possible, to talk of them. When they are challenged by tyranny abroad or by malpractice at home, we come back to them as the wardens of our public life—as for many of us they are wardens of our lives as men.

In foreign affairs we are not unfamiliar with either the use or the need of power. Yet we are stubbornly distrustful of it. We seem to know, and seem to come back again and again to this knowledge, that the purposes of this country in the field of foreign policy cannot in any real or enduring way be achieved by coercion.

Our Aversion to Coercion and Secrecy

We have a natural sympathy for extending to foreign affairs what we have come to learn so well in our political life at home: that an indispensable, perhaps in some ways *the* indispensable, element in giving meaning to the dignity of man, and in making possible the taking of decision on the basis of honest conviction, is the openness of men's minds, and the openness of whatever media there are for communion between men, free of restraint, free of repression, and free even of that most pervasive of all restraints, that of status and of hierarchy.

In the days of the founding of this republic, in all of the eighteenth century which was formative for the

growth and the explicit formulation of our political ideals, politics and science were of a piece. The hope that this might in some sense again be so was stirred to new life by the development of atomic energy. In this it has throughout been decisive that openness, openness in the first instance with regard to technical problems and to the actual undertakings underway in various parts of the world, was the one single essential precondition for a measure of security in the atomic age. Here we met in uniquely comprehensible form the alternatives of common understanding, or of the practices of secrecy and coercion.

In all this I pretend to be saying nothing new, nothing that has not been known to all thoughtful men since the days of Hiroshima; yet it has seldom come to expression; it has been overlaid with other preoccupations, perhaps equally necessary to the elaboration of an effective international control, but far less decisive in determining whether such a control could exist. It is just because it has not been possible to obtain assent, even in principle, even as an honest statement of intent or purpose, to these basic theses that the deadlock in attempting to establish control has appeared so serious, so refractory, and so enduring.

Our Failure in Winning Acceptance for These Principles

These words have an intent quite contrary to the creation of a sense of panic or of doom. Yet we need to start with the admission that we see no clear course before us that would persuade the governments of the world to join with us in creating a more and more open world, and thus to establish the foundation on which persuasion might so largely replace coercion in determining human affairs. We ourselves have acknowledged this grim prospect and responded by adopting some of the very measures that we had hoped might be universally renounced. With misgivings—and there ought to be misgivings—we are rearming, arming atomically, as in other fields. With deep misgivings, we are keeping secret not only those elements of our military plans, but those elements of our technical information and policy, a knowledge of which would render us more subject to enemy coercion and less effective in exercising our own. There are not many men who see an acceptable

alternative to this course, although there apparently are some who would regard it as a proof of the shallowness and insincerity of our earlier renunciation of these ways. But whether, among our own people or among our friends abroad, or even among those who are not our friends, these measures which we are taking appear excessive, or on the whole insufficient, they must have at least one effect. Inevitably, they must appear to commit us to a future of secrecy, of coercion, and to an imminent threat of war. It is true that one may hear arguments that the mere existence of our power, quite apart from its exercise, may turn the world to the ways of openness and of peace. Yet we have today no clear, no formulated, no in some measure credible account of how this may come about. We have chosen to read, and perhaps we have correctly read, our past as a lesson that a policy of weakness has failed us. But we have not read the future as an intelligible lesson that a policy of strength can save us.

When the time is run, and that future become history, it will be clear how little of it we today foresaw or could foresee. How then can we preserve hope and sensitiveness which could enable us to take advantage of all that it has in store? Our problem is not only to face the somber and the grim elements of the future, but to keep them from obscuring it.

Our recent election has seemed to touch this deep sense of the imponderable in the history of the future, this understanding that we must not preclude the cultivation of any unexpected, hopeful turnings. Immediately after the election people seemed stirred, less even by the outcome itself; than by the element of wonder; they would tend to say things like: "Well, after this perhaps we need not be so sure that there will be a war." This sense that the future is richer and more complex than our prediction of it, and that wisdom lies in sensitiveness to what is new and hopeful, is perhaps a sign of some maturity in politics.

The Importance of Style

The problem of doing justice to the implicit, the imponderable, and the unknown is, of course, not unique to politics. It is always with us in science, it is with us in the most trivial of personal affairs, and it is one of the great problems of writing and of all forms of art. The means by

which it is solved is sometimes called style. It is style which complements affirmation with limitation and with humility; it is style which makes it possible to act effectively, but not absolutely; it is style which, in the domain of foreign policy, enables us to find a harmony between the pursuit of ends essential to us, and the regard for the views, the sensibilities, the aspirations of those to whom the problem may appear in another light; it is style which is the deference that action pays to uncertainty; it is above all style through which power defers to reason.

Need To Reaffirm Our Values

We need to remember that we are a powerful nation.

We need to remember that when the future that we can now foresee deviates so markedly from all that we hope and all that we value, we can, by our example, and by the mode and the style with which we conduct our affairs, let it be apparent that we have not abandoned those hopes nor forsaken those values; we need to do this even while concrete steps, to which we resort to avert more immediate disaster, seem to negate them.

Our past is rich in example. In that other agony, the Civil War, where the foundations of our government were proved and reaffirmed, it was Lincoln who again and again struck true the balance between power and reason. By 1863 the war and the blockade had deepened the attrition of the South. They had also stopped the supplies of cotton to the English mills. Early that year Lincoln wrote a letter to the working men of Manchester. He wrote:

... It is not always in the power of governments to enlarge or restrict the scope of moral results which follow the policies that they may deem it necessary for the public safety from time to time to adopt.

I have understood well that the duty of self-preservation rests solely with the American people; but I have at the same time been aware that favor or disfavor of foreign nations might have a material influence in enlarging or prolonging the struggle with disloyal men in which the country is engaged. A fair examination of history has served to authorize a belief that the past actions and influences of the United States were generally regarded as having been beneficial toward mankind. I have, therefore, reckoned upon the forbearance of nations. . . .

Fifteen months later, a year before

Lincoln's death, the battle had turned. He could say:

... When the war began, three years ago, neither party, nor any man, expected it would last till now. Each looked for the end in some way, long ere to-day. Neither did any anticipate that domestic slavery would be much affected by the war. But here we are; the war has not ended, and slavery has been much affected—how much needs not now to be recounted. . . .

But we can see the past, though we may not claim to have directed it; and seeing it, in this case, we feel more hopeful and confident for the future. . . .

In such magnanimity even Grant, at Appomattox a year later, looking beyond the bitter slaughter, looking to nature and to time, could speak to Lee: His troops were to keep their horses; they would need them for the spring plowing.

Each of us, recalling our actions in these last critical years, will be able to find more than one instance where, in the formulation or implementation of policy, we have been worthy of this past. Each of us will mourn the opportunities that may seem to him lost, the doors once open and now closed. Not even in critical times can the sense of style, the open mind, be fostered by issuing directives; nor can they rest wholly on soliciting great actions not yet taken, great words not yet spoken. If they were wholly a matter for one man, all could rest on his wisdom and his sensitiveness—they neither are, nor can, nor should be.

The Spirit of the Open Mind

The spirit in which our foreign affairs are conducted will, in the large, reflect the understanding and the desires of our people; and their concrete, detailed administration will necessarily rest in the hands of countless men and women, officials of the government, who constitute the branches of our foreign service, of our State Department, and of the many agencies which now supplement the State Department, at home and abroad. The style, the perceptiveness, the imagination and the open-mindedness with which we need to conduct our affairs can only pervade such a complex of organizations, consisting inevitably of men of varied talent, taste, and character, if it is a reflection of a deep and widespread public understanding. It is in our hands to see that the hope of the future is not lost, because we were too sure that we knew the answers, too sure that there was no hope.